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# THE NEW PATH.

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## OUR FURNITURE; WHAT IT IS, AND WHAT IT SHOULD BE.

(Continued from page 62.)

It is generally the purchaser's fault if such furniture as we have been describing fills his house with its wretched *débris*. The dealers can hardly be blamed for supplying the demand. And the demand is for furniture that shall be cheap and shall look elegant and costly. This the dealer supplies. There is no falsehood even in the assurance, as he commonly gives it, that such a piece of furniture is well made. By the cabinet maker's standard, probably it is. And that this standard is so low is, of course, the fault of the careless purchaser, whose blind acceptance of bad material and workmanship and unwillingness to pay for good are helping to prevent us from rediscovering the lost art of decoration.

Observe, that slightness of work is not peculiar to inexpensive furniture. None of the furniture kept for sale is rightly made. Durability, as our ancestors understood it, is not dreamed of. No cabinet-maker proposes to himself any such thoroughness. The art of making furniture to last a generation uninjured does not exist in the trade. The most honorable and ambitious furniture dealer, most desirous to oblige a personal friend and good customer, and promising the best possible materials and workmanship, will fail to make a table or a bureau fit to use. The traditions of the trade prescribe such a method of joining, such a use of wood, such an application of carved ornament; all these empirical rules being as injurious as possible, and completely barring the workshops where

our furniture is made against the entrance of any true workmanlike feeling and pride of skilful craftsmanship. Observe, it is not that makers of furniture are ignorant of good construction. Probably foremen of furniture shops can be found who know how to frame wood together in the strongest way. We have seen the ash frame-work for a stuffed lounge rightly made, because this piece of construction was to be covered up and hidden from sight by curled hair, spiral springs and tufted rep, and because instinct and teaching united to show what system would be strongest. But fancied requirements of design—traditions of the trade—prevent the workman from doing anything so natural when the work is in rosewood and to be seen. And, observe, it is not that makers of furniture are unusually dull to understand or slow to act; they have no inducement to raise the standard. Why should a fashionable dealer make furniture to last fifty years, when he knows that all those of his customers who buy the best furniture he makes will require new furniture in fifteen years, because, of changes of fashion? We see the same mischievous tendency in other things besides furniture. The merchant who builds himself a city house can hardly expect to die in it, unless he should die soon, for society will require of him a different sort of outside before twenty years pass away. Therefore, city houses of the best class are but weakly built; city houses of a

lower class are worse built; and the country follows the city implicitly in methods of construction and quality of work.

These reasons for the bad construction of expensive furniture apply to cheaper furniture as well, with reasons additional. The general tendency in cheap things to be imitative of costly things is nowhere worse in its effects than in the case before us. It is this imitation which mainly tends to make cheap furniture the worthless thing it is. Costly furniture can at least be used; cheap ware cannot, with any comfort;—cannot long be used, at all. Were there no attempt at such imitation as we have mentioned, though knavish dealers would still try to pass off slight work as thorough, they could not so often succeed. The veneering, and shaping, and varnish, which make up the poor semblance of rich and costly work, so dazzle the careless purchaser that he cannot see the still very visible defects in workmanship. Or, if he sees, he does not perceive. What clearness of bodily sight would enable an ordinary buyer of furniture to see the worthlessness of that with which all his friends are well content? Moreover, the money which is wasted on the adornment of cheap furniture,—for even poor veneering ill applied, and machine-made ornaments attached by glue, cost money,—is needed to pay for durability. In the most elegant furniture there is no such limitation, there is no reason for poor work except the non-demand for good; but, in the stock of the great popular furniture dealers, low cost has been, necessarily, a consideration, and the first consideration, and every dollar wasted on foolish and valueless adornment, if not so appropriated, would be left to pay for good workmanship and well-selected wood.

Poor workmanship makes poor art. Good design will not often be found

married to bad manufacture. Charis was wife to Vulcan, king of artificers, not to a worse smith than he. Persistent, uniform bad work would ruin and banish the best art. And this, for two reasons. The artist cannot give his heart and his strength to that which is not to endure. One Angelo may carve a statue of snow, as one Cleopâtra may pledge her lover in dissolved pearls, but the artist cannot, as the woman will not, lavish his wealth continually on that which is but momentary and is speedily gone; and, perhaps, it was not his best statue nor her most precious pearls. We hope to see some workman throwing a little thought into his work, and shaping or carving his bit of wood into a form which will have some meaning and appropriateness. The first solidly-made book-case may not show any unusual merit except great care and accurate nicety of finish; but the second one may, very likely, exhibit something more than this, some idea or some fancy. Let us once get that and we shall get the whole. But we shall not get that while the workman thinks that his work will need repair in two years and annually thereafter, and that its whole life will be shorter than what remains of his own.

But there is another reason why bad work makes bad art. All good design is constructive. All good adornment grows naturally out of the structure, or, if it be of such high rank that it comes, like a painting into a chamber, demanding a place for its proper display, at least it does not contradict the structure. But most furniture must always be made beautiful without the aid of art of a high rank, and the design of such furniture must be the suggestion and result of the actual structure. The writer in the *Cornhill*, stating the case with extreme moderation, alludes to “the careful concealment of the structure” of fashionable furniture, which, he truly

says, is "a fatal mistake in the design of all useful objects." Certainly it is; the careful concealment of its structure would spoil the design of anything. It has long been held a positive law of architecture that construction, far from being concealed, should be displayed and decorated. Any school of building which has disregarded this law has been artistically valueless and has come to nought. In like manner the disregard of constructive design so evident in all our furniture, is a sufficient explanation of its general poverty and feebleness.

Some of the really cheap and utterly unpretending furniture which upholsterers ignore is really good. When anything is so humble that no one desires to make it elegant and tasteful, and which, consequently, is left to show just how it is made, we have the best result now possible to any furniture of the shops. Notice the plain white kitchen table, with four square legs slightly tapered, and smooth top, kept bright as a frigate's deck by constant scrubbing; that is a friendly and pleasant piece of furniture, not handsome, but not ugly, easily to be made handsome, and already better worth a place in a palace than the best marble-topped parlor table of rose-wood that a fashionable shop can furnish. The plain white ironing table, a box below, a seat upon the box, the table top tipped upright, forming a back to the seat, until it is adjusted on a Tuesday for ironing; this convenience is often good in design, proving that our carpenters have the sense of beauty, and can use it when it is not forbidden by custom and desire of display. The white pine stand of a chestnut seller in Wall street is shapely, and each end is decorated with a good pierced pattern. The Kentucky chair, and its brother in appearance, the Mayflower chair, are admirable; they are made entirely of round sticks, the two which make the hind legs and back slightly curved, but

all the others straight and plain and smooth; the seat of rushes, woven strongly, like cloth, and as white as they can be bleached. These chairs really are made in Kentucky and elsewhere in the West; they are of several sizes, and are the best chairs for many domestic purposes which can be procured; but the buyer should, in almost every case, saw off from a quarter to a half of an inch of the length of the hinder legs. The common office chair, of painted wood, with back and arms in one rounding sweep, though not graceful in its forms, is yet an honest and solid chair, not inappropriate in design. The better class of chairs of the same kind, those of walnut or oak, with woven cane seat, are a natural modification, and are good furniture enough, though needing various iron strengtheners to be properly durable. Some of the cane furniture, now so common, is very pleasant, constructed with great ingenuity, and often graceful in form and prettily varied in color. The common camp-chair is excellent, and has a flavor about it of the ancient and most honorable faldstool or *faudesteuil*, descended from the thing, while a word of different significance, *fauteuil*, is descended from the name. This camp chair, when luxuriously ample and provided with back and arms, is a favorite seat with many persons, in spite of its habit of groaning and cracking beneath the weight of the sitter. The new modifications of it;—one very popular in the army, which shuts from front to back instead of sideways, and which folds into smaller compass than any other kind of portable chair; another a much admired and really comfortable seat for sewing and reading at ease, with back a hollow quarter-cylinder;—are all good, because simply made of straight sticks, and can only be made faulty by some gratuitous falsehood added, which we sometimes, though rarely, see.

All these examples are of the cheaper and simpler kinds of furniture. We have seen reason to believe that more elaborate and expensive furniture is always tasteless and objectionable. The habit is so confirmed of utterly disregarding the make of the thing, and conceiving the whole as cut, somehow, out of one homogeneous piece, that it is accident or the direct imitation of some good piece of old work, which alone can give us furniture of good design for the drawing-room. You can often buy a table of sixteenth-century design, the edge decorated with a cable moulding, the four stout legs carved into graceful twisted columns, the whole solid and firm,—though not really well constructed nor likely to last a long time,—of picked walnut, not varnished. The danger is that the carver, who has perfectly well twisted the legs, will try also to carve the sides of the top rail with leaves and flowers; if he do, he will probably spoil all, for his skill will not be sufficient to give such delicacy to this work as it needs, nor his knowledge sufficient to make it otherwise than a caricature of nature.

Fashionable furniture is not always, however, equally bad. The sofas, for instance, of a few years ago, those with a high rounded back at each end and a low back between, were as detestable in design as anything can be; while those now to be bought, with the whole frame of the fabric visible, the cushions subordinate, and those of the back and seat separated by an open space, are so much better, that we hardly dare hope that the intelligent public which approved the others will also receive these.

But, better or worse, pretty in shape or ridiculously deformed, sensibly made or weak and monstrous, none of the furniture that we can buy is designed on the safe principle of exhibiting and making the most of the construction.

At present the thought and care of a workman are to conceal, to deceive, to try to mislead the public into some false belief as to the way wooden utensils are made.

When the cabinet makers begin to look with some reverence on their trade, and to design wooden articles as if they were not ashamed of their being wood, they will find themselves capable of doing better work than they have ever done, and, thereafter, they will daily do better. They will then have good precedents to go upon; as well, for they will be surprised to find that they are producing Gothic furniture.

Says our writer in the *Cornhill*:

"The growing taste for mediæval art in England has induced a feeling for what Pugin called the 'true principles' of design. There is no reason why these principles should not be applied to the simplest articles of domestic use. But this idea has never been carried out by any tradesman. The so-called Gothic furniture which is occasionally exposed for sale is at once needlessly elaborate, cumbrous and expensive. What is wanted is a class of goods which shall be designed by those who have really made a study of decorative art, and which, while it meets the requirements of the present age in point of convenience, will also bear competition with ordinary furniture in regard to price."

That which mediæval art has taught the English, it would be well if we also could learn. Since the opportunities afforded us are less ample than those which Europeans enjoy, it becomes us to use them carefully. There is mediæval furniture remaining in Europe, of all ages, from the tenth to the fifteenth centuries; of all qualities, from the humblest kitchen utensil to the lordly dais-settle; of all materials and for all purposes. Illustrated manuscripts also afford abundant examples, adding greatly to our knowledge and resources. And all this great store of old furniture and utensils is most valuable to the modern workman and designer, for therein is a

school of decorative and constructive art nowhere else to be found and which nothing else could replace.

These treasures, very recently unvalued, except by a few antiquaries, and not understood by those few, have now their recognized importance in the kingdom of art, and begin even to be studied. They are scattered throughout Europe; the largest part in museums, either public or belonging to wealthy collectors; many in the sacristies of churches, the treasuries of cathedrals and the refectories of convents; some few in the hands of those who have inherited them with their family estates. It would be a great labor for any one to gain, by his own investigations, anything like a complete knowledge of the possessions of Europe of such mediæval relics. It is evident how valuable would be a collection of accurate representations, with descriptions and measurements, and histories, where possible, of all the important articles. It is evident how valuable must be even a partial collection of such representations and accounts.

This is supplied by the work of M. Viollet-le-Duc, of which the title is given above. It is a guide to those uncollected and uncatalogued treasures. In respect to ordinary furniture, *meubles*, it is the first in the field. The iron-work, *orfèvrerie*, jewelry, decorative painting, mosaics, stained glass, book-binding, ivory carving and enamelling in metal of the Middle Ages, have all been illustrated, more or less completely, while the wooden furniture and common utensils have scarcely been noticed. The book before us undertakes to supply this deficiency, and does it admirably well. It covers the whole ground. There is first the Dictionary, beginning with *Armoire* and ending with *Voile*, nearly every article illustrated with woodcuts, and some, as *Armoire*, *Coffret*, *Lit*, *Lutrin*, *Reliquaire* and others, with full-page

engravings, etchings or chromo-lithographs. Then follow chapters entitled *Résumé Historique*, *Vie Publique de la Noblesse Féodale*, *Vie Privée de la Noblesse Féodale*, *Vie Privée de la Haute Bourgeoisie*, and *Conclusion*.

The Dictionary of Architecture, by the same author, is much better known in this country than the book of which we are speaking. Those who know the marvellously expressive, intelligible, instructive woodcuts of that noble book can imagine how useful are the pictures in this.

There have been illustrations, before this book, of single pieces of furniture, deemed of sufficient importance to be allowed place in works devoted to mediæval architecture. Many of these have been well represented, on a larger scale, indeed, than the pictures in the *Dictionnaire*, and with equal accuracy. The magnificent Retabulum of Westminster, of which two illustrations are given by M. Viollet-le-Duc, has also been given in the latest edition of G. G. Scott's work on Westminster Abbey; and, where the two renderings differ, as they do in minor points not affecting the design, strict accuracy is with the English version. Of all the wood-carving represented in the book before us, there is nothing that can compare in richness and variety with the magnificent stalls from Erfurt, of which faithful drawings are given in R. Norman Shaw's invaluable book, "Sketches on the Continent." But this *Dictionnaire Raisonné* is the first book in which any system is observed, any satisfactory analysis and history given, any attempt made to do for the furniture what has been done so well for the building of the Middle Ages—to ascertain and declare the principles of its construction and decoration. It is true that a student of mediæval art can collate facts from widely separated and differing sources of information; but this is impossible to

persons whose work is in other departments, and the book before us is principally for them. Consider, for instance, those pictures in this book which are taken from mediæval manuscripts, not in fac simile, but "*rectifié*" in perspective and drawing; the student of art had rather see the original miniature or a faithful copy of its lines, but the conscientious translation of it into good drawing is better for the purpose in view, and these translations are conscientious, so far as we have been able to verify them. Consider, also, those pictures in this book which represent interiors and *entourages* of the twelfth, thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; they are to be found under *lit*, *litière*, *table*, *tapis*, and in the chapter on the private life of the feudal nobility; these are composed as the historian composes his narrative, giving some, but not all his authorities, his integrity and ambition being the reader's assurance. Our author's reputation for profound and accurate knowledge of mediæval art in all its branches is as wide as Europe; all his work, whether in stone or on paper, proves the truth of his reputation and his own great ability as an artist. He is doing a work the greatness of which cannot yet be fully appreciated. Moreover, the compositions of which we are speaking bear internal evidence of their historical and artistic truth.

For these reasons, and because this book is more accessible to Americans than the Musée de Cluny or the South Kensington Museum, being procurable by any one through his bookseller, we shall refer, for a few words upon mediæval furniture, to this portable *Musée Viollet-le-Duc*.

There is no ornamental furniture of importance remaining to us of an earlier period than the twelfth century. It is noticeable in the art of this and preceding centuries that the iron-work is

better than the work in wood or stone. The blacksmiths had reached nearer the perfection of their art, in these early times, than the carvers of wood and of stone. The castings in bronze of the same period were of marvellous beauty and delicacy. The stone carving around a church doorway was rude, and the heavy oak door was not carved nor even put together with skill; the iron hinges were wrought with exquisite skill and delicacy into leaf-and-flower work of beautiful outline, and held together in their appointed places the heavy, unjoined planks; and all was bright with rich colors and gold. The stone altar was either uncarved, or decorated with a little archaic sculpture, but it was richly adorned with paintings, and the bronze faudesteuil which formed the bishop's throne was a piece of casting such as no modern brass foundry has yet produced. In the furniture of this time there is to be seen little attempt at carving in the wood even the simplest forms. The coffers and cabinets were made of solid oak planks, not panelled, not always united even by the tongue-and-groove joint of the peculiar form then in use, not often even dove-tailed together at the corners, as all modern boxes and drawers are. On the iron fastenings all the strength of this early work depends. Straps of iron bind together sides and bottom, corner plates of iron connect sides and ends, long hinges hold the top. All these fastenings are wrought with the hammer into tendrils and leaves; the plain box seems clasped by vines and twining plants which have suddenly stiffened into strength and symmetry. The richest adornment is generally clustered around the lock. The piece itself being so plain, relieved only by its rich fastenings of iron, painting was the natural resource of people who cared for beauty, and was used, except in those cases, comparatively few, in Western Europe, where mosaic could

be obtained. A few beautiful mosaics have come down to us, but they are either of Eastern make or directly imitated from the East. In France it seems that the painters and gilders were the artists usually called upon to complete the work of the carpenter and blacksmith, and cover the rudely-made *bahut* or *armoire* with figures of saints or incidents of war and hunting.

Sculpture begins with the beginning of the thirteenth century to make oak furniture as rich as it was making cathedral porches. Painting becomes subordinate and accessory. Wrought iron lends its aid only where hinges and locks must be, and then is rich as before and more delicate in workmanship. Mosaic is nearly abandoned.

The art of the thirteenth century is representative of the art we call mediæval. Its great merits are then the greatest, its defects its own; no weakness remaining from the past, no vice nor excellence having crept in from new modes of thought. In describing, then, the characteristics of thirteenth-century furniture we shall be describing the furniture of the Middle Ages.

The love of the direct representation of natural forms, visible in the mediæval mind from the first, had grown and strengthened until it overmastered all feelings save the kindred one of love of beauty. The forms of plants and animals were represented as the principal and most valued decoration. The top of a bedpost was not shaped into a knob, even a bud or conventional flower would not satisfy; the wood was cut into a perched bird or a crouched leopard or a monk with open book on knee. A pierced panel was not cut into flourishes or strange leaf-shaped scrolls, as Moorish work was and Chinese is, but animals chased each other through twining leafy branches, and little figures of men and women and angels sat with harps

and lutes within wreaths of tendrils and leaves.

Beauty of material was little regarded. Oak, even if richly grained, was painted with bright colors, and,—where large, undecorated surfaces were to be found, as, for instance, panels,—with the stirring incidents the people loved, or the divine or human objects of their worship.

Strength and permanence was always sought. The wood was framed together in the best and most solid way. The weak and disfiguring mitre-joint was unknown or unused, woodwork was always put together as the frames of our panelled doors, by the mortice-and-tenon joint. Although greater size was given the pieces of wood than strength demanded, and although the work of the time was surpassed in skilfulness of construction by work of the following century, yet this additional thickness gave more opportunity for deep and rich carving, and was welcome on that account.

The most important characteristic follows from this; that great secret of all the splendor and perfection of the art of the time, of which this journal has so often spoken. The ornament all grows out of and exhibits the construction.

"That which characterizes the furniture of the middle age"—we translate from page 360—"is not so much its richness as the taste and reason shown in the adoption of forms, the frank acknowledgment of destination, the infinite variety, the appearance of solidity, the true employment of material according to its nature. Wood, copper and iron preserve the forms which are suitable to them; the construction is always apparent, whatever may be the abundance of ornamentation. In fact, articles made of wood have always the original appearance of the framing; it is not until the fifteenth century that this construction is concealed by confused decoration. Up to that time textile fabrics were particularly intended

to clothe the simple forms of the furniture itself; for this reason they were employed in great profusion by the rich nobles; a search among inventories or an examination of the vignettes of manuscripts will enable us to judge of this."

This spirit of constructiveness is never so active as in the best time, the central time, the great thirteenth century. There was no attempt then to disguise the construction of anything; the real shape of every part and the putting together of the parts, were not only visible but displayed, insisted on. In the century before, it was often—not intentionally, but in the course of the enriching by paint, gold, enamel or inlaid work—concealed. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the desire to show the structure was less strong, the fancy for tracery, thin bars, the look of metal work, and cutting away and cutting thin grew daily stronger, and the notion that the lines of mouldings should be continuous and not bounded by the extent of each part, had birth and grew popular. But in the thirteenth century the necessary framing together of the wood directed and limited the design. Every one could see that here was a joint, where one carved stick was framed into another; —that here was a panel made of a stout board covered deep with carved foliage or tracery, and its edges let into the four pieces of the framework, which, richly sculptured on their faces and daintily chamfered at their edges, formed the square opening, filled by the panel in question. It is impossible, without some sort of illustration, to explain more in detail the manner in which this principle is applied to all kinds of work. We can only allude to it, suggest to our readers that they will enjoy tracing for themselves the evidences and instances of it, and pass on to the last point now claiming our attention.

The adaptation of the ornamentation to the nature of the material is as universal and as beautiful as the adaptation of the ornament to the structure. It is not well to cut small chains or lace-work patterns out of marble, though it is often done in modern times. It is not well to take granite as a medium for sculptured thought when marble is to be had. It is not well to imitate the look of cut stone with thin sheets of iron stamped into shape. It is not well to cut wood into the complicated forms which are good in wrought iron. All these laws and all such laws are now persistently, constantly violated. But, in the thirteenth century, they were all observed and always observed. On page 368 of the *Dictionnaire* is shown a *banc-a-barre*, or large settle, the back and arms of which are framed into four stout uprights. Each one of these is topped by a figure. One of these figures is of a large bird, apparently a pelican, so disposed that no piece of wood can be split away by accident or shrinkage of the wood; the long neck and bill, though difficult things surely to manage in such a piece of carving, naturally and safely brought in upon the body, out of harm's way. Such a precaution as that would naturally be observed in any piece of wood carving, in the design of which common sense and good taste have had any share. It is to be remembered that wood separates easily in one direction, even without violence, by the action of heat and moisture, while it has great strength to resist transverse breakage, and yet greater to resist tension. Stone is in every way different, and metals different again, in their nature. Designs, therefore, are to be very different in principle, of these different materials. What would be good in one would be weak, ugly and false in another.